

# Managing a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) in Your Relationship

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## What is a TBI?

A Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is a complex injury with a broad spectrum of symptoms and disabilities ranging from mild to severe. The impact on a person and his or her family can be devastating.

### What causes a TBI?

- Head being struck by object
- Head striking object
- Nearby blasts/explosions that impact the head

### Most common Causes of TBI in Veterans:

- Explosive blasts
- Blasts plus motor vehicle accident
- Motor vehicle accident alone
- Gunshot wounds

A TBI can cause a number of difficulties for the person who is injured. These can include **physical changes, changes in the person's behavior, or changes in cognitive functioning.** These changes are often related to how severe the brain injury was at the time of the injury (Understanding Traumatic Brain Injury: Polytrauma/TBI System of Care).

## TBI Symptoms

- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Problems walking
- Fatigue

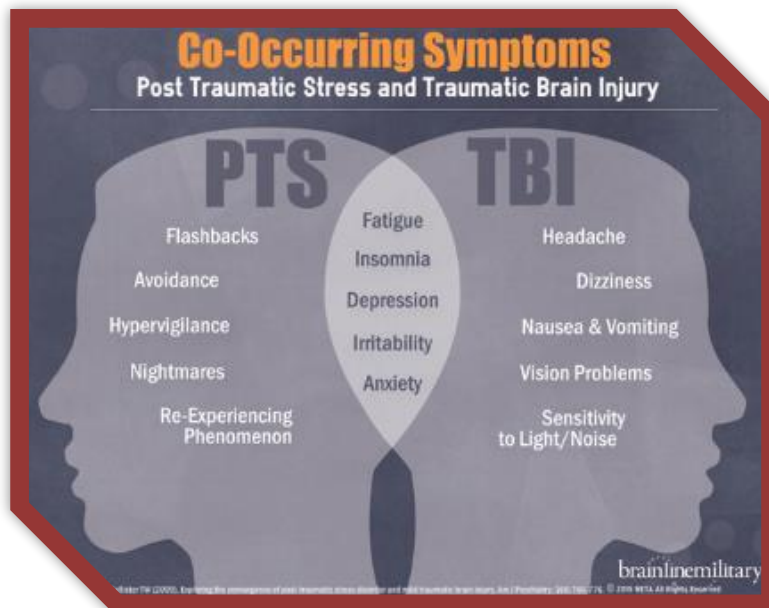
- Irritability
- Memory problems
- Difficulty paying attention
- Difficulty processing information

While a TBI is a serious injury, it does not mean all hope is lost - for the person living with the injury, or for their relationships.

If you have been diagnosed with a TBI, your life, and relationships have changed, but it does not have to keep you from enjoying your life, your partner, and your future.

### TBI and PTSD

For veterans who have experienced trauma in addition to a brain injury, after effects and care can be complicated by the fact that symptoms of **PTSD and TBI often overlap or mirror one another**. Treatments for PTSD and TBIs are very different, so a misdiagnosis can impair treatment success. Additionally, it is common for many veterans to have both a TBI and PTSD, which impacts the recommended course of treatment (Lash, 2013).



## What are the Effects of a TBI?

TBIs are common and may be missed initially when a medical team is focused on providing life-saving measures. Although medical technology has advanced significantly, the effects of a TBI on a person's life can still be profound. For many people with severe TBI, long-term rehabilitation is often necessary to maximize function and independence. Even mild TBI (mTBI) can have serious consequences on a person's life. **For individuals who experienced a mTBI downrange, symptoms typically subside within 18-24 months of the injury, though a small percentage of individuals go on to develop chronic post-concussive symptoms** (Understanding Traumatic Brain Injury: Polytrauma/TBI System of Care).

### Every TBI is different, and every person's experience will be different.

Research has shown that a TBI can cause the brain to 'age,' and can damage the cerebellum. This can lead to difficulty with physical movement and communication, which can impair one's ability to get along with others, or to care for themselves. Other symptoms include vision, hearing, or other sensory problems, and complications in the body's response to illness or injury. TBI has also been linked to other mental and brain health issues, including an increased risk for depression, Alzheimer's, and epilepsy.



**While PTSD is a mental health diagnosis, a TBI is a medical condition, meaning it can only be diagnosed by a medical professional. Though it can affect many areas of a person's life, it is ultimately a physical impairment.**

## TBI in the Relationship

### Changes in Responsibilities and Roles

**As a result of TBI symptoms, individuals often must sacrifice some of the responsibilities they may have previously held in a relationship.** For instance, a TBI may cause one to get chronic headaches, making it difficult for them to complete household chores that were previously their responsibility. Some TBI symptoms can even prevent an individual from being able to maintain employment.

This may cause a partner to take on new responsibilities he or she didn't have before, such as supplementing the family financially or providing caregiver support. **This added responsibility can put stress on both the partner and the veteran.** Depending on the severity of the injury, caregivers sacrifice in order to take on more of the household responsibilities, while the veteran may feel discouraged by not being able to complete tasks they used to be able to complete with ease. As a result, both partners struggle with feelings of deficiency or feeling a lack of purpose.

### Changes and Challenges in Communication

**A TBI can impact the parts of the brain that control language processing,** which can lead to a variety of difficulties in communication following the injury. This can include difficulty with information processing, speech, or writing. We know how important communication is to a healthy relationship, and faulty communication puts a strain on the relationship. If the TBI survivor has difficulty speaking, understanding their partner, or retaining information, this strain can be even more exacerbated.

**These breakdowns in communication can leave both the veteran and their partner feeling alone and isolated.**

A partner may feel they no longer understand what their veteran is thinking or feeling, or like their partner can't understand them, or worse, that they just don't care to. These difficulties can cause both partners to pull away from one another, creating distance in the relationship. Both partners may choose not to communicate their feelings with each other, or with anyone at all. We know that communication struggles can impact all other aspects of a relationship as well, making it difficult to feel close, adjust to changes, and work through conflicts together.

## Strategies to Manage Changing Roles

- Identify which roles and responsibilities are changing and use your communication skills to talk about these changes openly. How will they affect each of you, your family, and the relationship?
- Although those with a TBI may not be able to maintain a former role, they can share their knowledge with their partner, and help them adjust to that new role.
- Family and friends may need to be educated about brain injury and the changes it brings. Children who live at home will also benefit from direct discussions about these changes.
- Holding your feelings inside for too long is likely to cause destruction in your relationship. It is understandable for you both to be frustrated, or even resentful at your new normal. Make a point to talk about challenges in order to reduce tension within your relationship. If you're having difficulty communicating effectively consider seeking professional help to guide you.
- If you worry your veteran is feeling a lack of purpose, help them brainstorm other ways to get that purpose back. Maybe they can give back to your community or assist you and the family in new ways.
- Giving each other permission to take breaks is imperative. Schedule opportunities to take breaks from responsibilities by spending time with friends, exercising, or investing in a hobby. Don't be afraid to seek out friends or family members that can provide back up support for family so that you are able to take time to care for you!
- With all these role changes, it's important to remember that your most important role is as their partner. Sometimes it can be hard to still feel that kind of connection amidst everything else going on. Don't forget to invest in date nights, where you can bring fun and joy into your life!

## Strategies to Improve Communication

- Even though your ability to communicate may have changed, commit to improving from where you currently are.
- Remember that those with a TBI will likely need more time to think about what their partner is saying. Patience is key.
- Similarly, paraphrasing can be a very effective way to help both partners ensure they are hearing and understanding their partner correctly. If your partner with a TBI does not give a correct paraphrase, try re-stating what you want to say in a different way.
- Keep your points short and sweet. Use the “In situation X, when Y happened, I felt Z” format.
- Try taking notes on your thoughts during conversations rather than immediately saying what comes to mind. This will allow you to come back to these points later.
- If you have something important you want to discuss with your partner, give them a heads up beforehand, so that they can have time to mentally prepare.
- Exchange bulleted lists of important points for big discussions. When you have something you would like to say, write it down before a discussion and use it as a guide. Even better, share your list with your partner ahead of time to allow them to prepare themselves for the conversation. Trading these lists afterwards will help with memory and allows more time to digest and think through the information.
- Write each other letters! Sometimes reading information can make it easier to process, or answer questions. In turn, it may be easier for a partner with a TBI to write down their thoughts and feelings rather than verbally sharing them.
- Time outs can be really helpful! Taking time away from each other to cool off allows for more time to process what happened, and can help with regulating emotions. Remember to always set up a time to come back together to keep talking. If your partner struggles with short-term memory loss, consider setting a timer on your phone and having a list of what you will talk about.
- Listen for points where you can agree, rather than focusing on disagreement.



## Caregiver Stress

Being in a relationship with someone affected by a TBI can present challenges, many of which are similar to the challenges experienced by those whose partner is experiencing PTSD. **Many caregiver partners have expressed the following concerns:**

- **My loved one won't seek help**
- **Counseling and/or drugs doesn't seem to "fix" it**
- **The side effects that come with prescription drugs are making things worse**
- **Life has changed. What if we never get our old life back?**
- **My partner has changed. What if I never get my partner, or the relationship we had back?**
- **I feel like I'm my partner's only lifeline and only support**
- **Navigating the complexities of the health care system is exhausting**
- **I feel like I'm a buffer between my partner and the rest of the world**
- **I have to be the one to help the kids understand and cope with our new life**
- **Navigating the impact of a medical diagnosis on the individual and the family**

These issues, and others, can lead to what's called caregiver stress, which is **a state of physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion that can be accompanied by changes in mood**. A TBI does not just impact the person who has the injury - it can severely impact the person who cares for them, as well.



### Signs of Caregiver Stress

- > Withdrawal from friends and family
- > Loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed
- > Feeling blue, irritable, hopeless, and helpless
- > Insomnia
- > Changes in sleep patterns

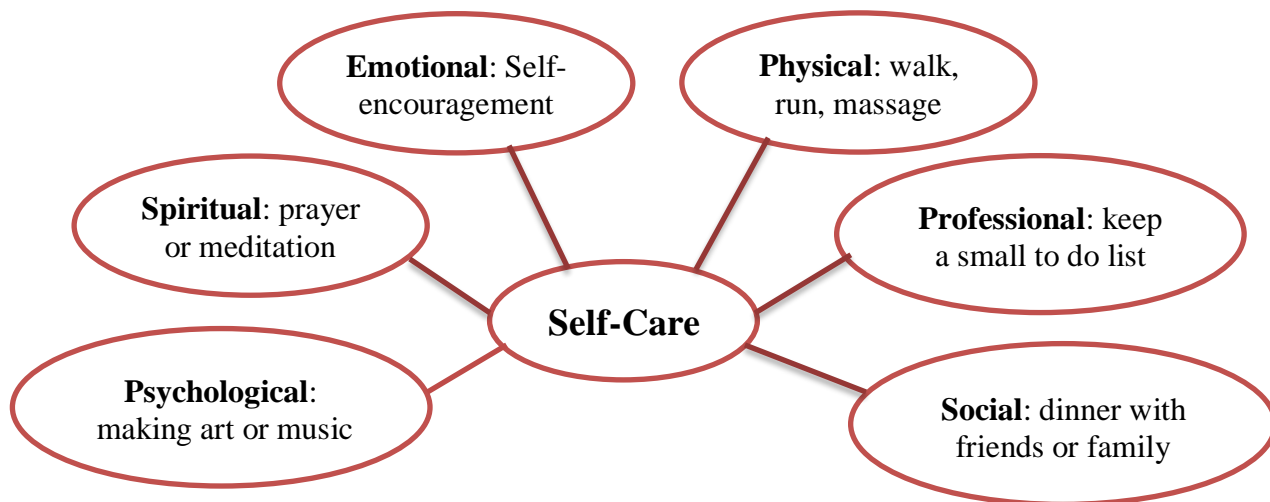
- > Getting sick more often
- > Emotional and physical exhaustion
- > Excessive use of alcohol and/or sleep medications
- > Irritability
- > Changes in appetite, weight, or both

### Strategies to Manage Caregiver Stress

Caregivers often spend a lot of their time and energy focused on caring for their partner with TBI, and for the family around them. **Taking care of yourself may feel like a luxury, but it is a necessity in order to be a whole and healthy person.** Taking care of ourselves is crucial if we want wellbeing and joy in our lives.

Self-care is so important! It is important to be thinking about the different areas of yourself and your life, and how you can do better to implement care for yourself. No one will do this for you. You must believe that you are worth advocating for!

**Self-care can look different for different people, but it can include:**



## When Stressors Lead to Resentment

If changes and stressors are not addressed in the relationship, this can lead to resentment in both the partner and the veteran. **It is natural to be upset, angry or resentful of the injury that caused so much disruption to your life.** Coming to accept your new normal requires a grieving process - mourning the loss of what you had, as well as mourning what you had hoped for your future.

**For veterans**, an injury may cause them to resent the military, or even members of their unit. The shift of some roles from the veteran to their partner can also cause veterans to struggle with feelings of anger or helplessness, as a result of no longer being able to carry out certain tasks, or care for their family in ways they used to. **Veterans may project these feelings onto their partners unintentionally, or their partners may perceive these feelings as resentment towards them for being able to do what their veteran no longer can.**



**For partners**, similar resentment can build. They may come to resent their injured partner for the way things are, not because they blame them, but because they don't know where else to direct their grief. We often take negative feelings out on those we love because they seem safest. **You may miss the person your partner was before the injury, and feel cheated by the TBI.** You may build resentment towards the military or your partner for the new roles and responsibilities you've had to take on, especially if you are lacking needed supports.

**You may know, rationally, that there is no actual blame to place - no one asks for a TBI - but it is still easy to be upset by how much your lives have to be rearranged and how much focus and energy this injury can take up.** Resentment can be difficult to cope with, and is one of the easiest paths to unhappiness in a relationship, as it grows and festers over time. Making the effort to let go of the way things were before, extending your partner grace for the situations they cannot control, as well as being aware of how one feels and sharing those feelings with your partner, are all huge steps in combatting resentment. **It's hard to admit that some things are never going to be as they were, but what can give you hope moving forward is recognizing what you can control, and all the resources and supports you have at your disposal to move forward with strength.**

## TBI Treatment

A TBI is a medical diagnosis, and thus treatment for the survivor will have to be managed by a medical team. Treatments focus on the symptoms that cause problems in everyday life.

(Treatment: Brain Injury Association Of America).

Treatments can include:

- Medications
- Learning strategies to deal with health, cognitive, and behavioral problems
- Rehabilitation therapies (such as physical, occupational, or speech -language therapy)
- Assistive devices and technologies

Outside support can be essential, too, for both partners and those diagnosed with a TBI. **You are a major source of support to your partner, as are they to you, but having your partner be your *only* form of support or being the only support for your veteran is a lot to ask of each other.** We cannot be everything our partner needs all of the time, and having friends, family, and community can be really valuable!

An injury does not mean the end to a happy relationship, or to your roles as each other's best friend, partner, and lover.

One thing to remember as you navigate a TBI in your relationship is that you are still partners, and are still a team. It can be hard to find ways to feel that love, and romance, when there are so many other responsibilities and roles that you need to be for each other.

**However, the fundamental truth of your relationship is that you picked each other over all the others to love and care for – that is still true.**

Most relationships where one partner is affected by a TBI will benefit from professional mental health counseling or support groups. While individual care is very important, couples counseling can also help you move through the grief, changes, and your new normal effectively. There is no shame in needing help, especially as a mechanism for navigating a serious injury.

## References

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